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Crossing the Date line: Perspectives of Canadian students studying education in an Australian Regional University

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Abstract:

The research reported here aims to develop understandings around the expectations and perceptions of Canadian students entering a Graduate Diploma of Education program in an Australian university. The study align well with the theme of “crossing borders”, as the study focuses on international students ‘crossing borders’ to achieve their accreditation goals in another country. The particular context of this research is a sizeable cohort (90 – 100 annually) of Canadian students who attend an Australian regional university to gain a teaching qualification.

Based on the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, the study employed qualitative methods to understand the expectations and perspectives of the students early in, and during their progress through the program. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews: researchers conducted three interviews with each participant across the first six months of the students’ year long stay. The ‘moments’ of each interview were: (i) prior to attending their first week of lectures; (ii) after they had completed the first lecture series of four courses; and (iii) after participants completed their first block of practical experience in an Australian school. The data was then analysed using constant interrogation and context theory. This report is based on the initial findings of these interviews and identifies the themes and understandings expressed by the Canadian students who have ‘crossed the date line’.

The findings will be presented in four main themes that have emerged from the data: personal growth; cultural experiences; development of teacher identity; and the implications for university programs. Collectively the data highlight the concepts of global perspectives, the internationalization of university programs, and the issues of teacher identity. As the participants developed their ideas and understandings about themselves within the program, further confirmation was gained to suggest that participants entered the program with this perspective.

Participants also demonstrated an intention to develop a clearly independent personal and professional identity for themselves and saw the year of study abroad as an opportunity to explore their own personal strengths and weaknesses. This corresponds with Geijsel and Meijers(2005) definition of identity and the implications of the development of identity seen through the data.

Finally the initial findings indicate that universities accepting international students into their programs have a broad range of professional and ethical responsibilities in the development of global teachers with a global perspective. With regard to the case study university, the findings suggest that Australian universities which invite international students tend to rely on individual students developing a global perspective rather than adding to or enhancing this perspective.

Keywords: pre-service teacher education, internationalization, global perspectives, teacher identity.

Body of Paper

This paper reports on the initial findings of a study that investigates the expectations and perspectives of Canadian students entering a Graduate Diploma teacher education program in an Australian university. These expectations and perspectives were recorded during the participating students' first six months in the program and they bring into focus a range of issues directly related to the conference topic of *Teacher Education Crossing Borders*. The data collected and the findings that emanate from them provide a useful insight into aspects of the internationalisation of education, developing global perspectives in teachers and how teacher education is addressing contextual differences, cultural diversity and related curriculum issues.

Background and context

Irwin University is a small, relatively new university in Queensland, Australia and Education Programs in the university are even more recent, having been in place for less than five years. Because of the geographical location of the university's campus, and a number of fortuitous contacts, the university has attracted a sizeable number of Canadian students seeking to gain accreditation as teachers. The Canadian students that have come to Irwin University are all graduates seeking to study a one-year Graduate Diploma program which leads to registration in both Queensland and subsequently with the Ontario Board of Teachers. The presence of these pre-service teachers at the University have prompted much reflection on the ecology of teacher education as offered in the Graduate Diploma program and to that end the issue of developing global teachers beyond the requirements of the state's College of Teachers. Reflection by the authors has led to the research reported below and the paper that follows.

Literature Review

Ling, Burman, Cooper and Ling (2006) suggest that Canadian students form by far the largest single cohort of international students in teacher training in Australia, yet empirical literature on the experiences of Canadian pre-service teachers and the meanings they give to those experiences does not reflect this and is surprisingly small. The contextual literature, focussing on international

students more generally, and particularly those studying to be teachers, brings together themes of globalisation, internationalisation, global perspectives and a concept identified by Ling et al. (2006) as the cosmopolitan learner. These form central themes within this paper and relate to the data as it emerged.

McKittrick (2003), in an empirical study, coined the term ‘mutual admiration society’ in the relations between Canadian students and their Australian counterparts. He also investigated the phases that Canadian students move through when studying in a transnational context. The phases he suggested were pre-departure, arrival, study and returning home. These were useful in the research design phase as they complemented the view that interviews needed to be conducted at certain stages. In this study interviews would relate to the second and third of McKittrick’s phases. However the choice of junctures in this study suggested that the phases proposed by McKittrick were too simple.

Relich and Kindler (1996) in an evaluation of a teacher education program accepting Canadian students found that Canadian students reported their experiences as “highly positive and worthwhile and one which extended beyond the academic and professional qualifications” (p.6). The search for what lies beyond the qualifications was explored by Ling et al (2006) who reported on the global perspectives that Canadian students may bring to their experiences in Australia and suggested the dimensions that international study might have on teachers who cross national boundaries to gain qualifications. In particular the study juxtaposed the perspectives of a more ‘localised’ approach to teacher education with those of teachers, in this case Canadians, who had studied outside their own country. The themes of ‘global perspectives’ were particularly useful in informing this study.

Globalisation was described by Pike (2000) as one of the principal influences of the late 20th and early 21st century. The growth in numbers of students travelling overseas to study or to gain accreditation reflects one or more aspects of this significant feature of the post-Fordist world. Olssen, Codd and O’Neill (2004) argue for three levels of globalisation, economic, political and cultural. While the economic dimension pertains to international students from other perspectives, most notably in terms of university income, this study is primarily informed by the ideas of cultural globalisation. Olssen et al. argue that cultural globalisation “is largely transmitted by the expansion of transnational enterprises” (p.6) and it is in this context that the study occurs.

The third dimension of the literature informing this study is that of internationalisation. de Wit and Knight (1997) in de Wit (1997) developed a working definition of internationalisation as “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and

service functions of the institution.” (p.1) Internationalisation is seen in operation at many universities and is having an increasingly strong impact on governments and universities when they are developing policies to cater for the inclusion of international students (Ling et al., 2000).

This definition is further clarified by de Wit (1997) as inclusive of three main elements (i) internationalisation as a process; (ii) internationalisation as a response to globalisation and not to be confused with the globalisation process itself; and (iii) internationalisation that includes both international and local elements (that is, intercultural). This idea of intercultural internationalisation is exemplified in Giddens’ (2000) notion of the cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitans, and in this case cosmopolitan students, are defined as welcoming and embracing intercultural complexity. Giddens talks of the globalized world as one where traditional boundaries between groups, nations and beliefs are blurred and broken and suggests that cosmopolitans as opposed to fundamentalists are much more comfortable with this type of situation. Ling et al. (2006) also refer to the notion of cosmopolitanism and suggest that there is “a dualism between the need to be simultaneously global and local in our thinking and activities” (p.144) particularly with reference to the situated nature of teacher education. The Canadian cohort of this study in many ways represents these characteristics. The cosmopolitan attitudes and beliefs of the students are tested and refined through their study abroad experience, in coming to terms with the local thinking and activity provided by the context of the localised, accredited teacher education courses.

Sitting under this internationalisation of the higher education setting is the issue of global perspectives often held by individuals. Case (1993), Hanvey (1975) and Knip (1996), (cited in NSTA, 2006), clarify global perspective in terms of ‘cross cultural understanding, open-mindedness, anticipation of complexity, resistance to stereotyping’ as well as ‘the appreciation of other peoples points of view’ (p.5). This poses the question as to whether these characteristics actually exist in international students studying in teacher education and in what measure they impact on students’ success.

Pike (2000) outlines the qualities of global education from the perspectives of a classroom practitioner as several broad concepts. These are interdependence, connectedness, perspective and multiple perspectives. Pike (2000) does contend that practitioners will have a variety of interpretations of these constructs however it is not the role of this research to contest or define these. Jepson, Turner and Calway (2002) also discuss a range of characteristics of students who are working within the global education market and taking an active role in shaping the global education debate. Of particular interest here is that Jepson et al. recognise, as a “double burden”,

the extent of experience in a student's own educational system and secondly the expectations from Australian academics.

Tang and Choi (2004) suggest that further research is required on international student experiences. Further they advocate for further examination of the issues related to structural and institutional parameters of programs in universities. This should be complemented by a focus on the cultural and educational context of cross-cultural settings in which the programs are enacted. It is in the area that this study seeks to examine further.

Research methods

Because the purpose of the research was to unearth the perspectives and expectations of Canadian students who 'cross the date line' to engage in the Graduate Diploma program in teacher education, the research was designed as a qualitative study, taking an interpretivist perspective (O'Donoghue, 2007). The study followed the approach of grounded theory in that the study sought to develop theory from the data that emerged, and the techniques of data analysis were conducted along the patterns of this tradition (Morse and Richards, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were selected as the principal data collection method as these would be most appropriate for the purpose outlined (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). As the study involved eliciting responses from Canadian students alone, the sample of participants was purposively selected. No deliberate selection was made by gender, although in recent cohorts of Canadian students females have far outnumbered males. Of the volunteers who presented for participation, all of whom were interviewed, the gender balance was slightly in favour of females. This was considered appropriate as proportional representation was not an issue and the perceptions of each gender could be equally important. Two groups of students were chosen for interview. The first was drawn from the cohort of students who presented for study in the first semester in the year of study; the second group was drawn from those who arrived in Australia in the second semester. The size of the first group was 10; the size of the second 8.

A series of three interviews across the first semester of the students' year was employed to gather data on the perspectives of the participants. The first of the three interviews was conducted prior to the students beginning their engagement with the program, either before their classes began or in the first week of the semester. The second interview was conducted after ten weeks of classroom instruction, but before any of them had experienced their first practicum. The third interview was

carried out at the end of the students' first semester, after the participants had finished their first practicum placement. The whole interview process was then repeated with a second cohort of students in the following semester. For reasons imposed by the University's Human Research Ethics committee, research could not be conducted in the second semester of the students' experience, because the principal researcher taught the students in that semester. While this decision was initially disappointing, it served to define more carefully the purpose of the research. The study was not meant to be an evaluation of the course but to be an exploration of the students' perceptions and experiences as they saw them. While it would have been beneficial to have conducted a final interview at the end of their full year of study, the data analysis later revealed that a satisfactory level of 'saturation' (Bryman, 2008; Glaser, 1978) had been achieved with the number of participants and the size of the cohorts.

The initial, semi-structured interview held with the participants focussed on teasing out students' perceptions and expectations in three main areas: (i) the nature of education programs; (ii) the Australian context; and (iii) the University's characteristics. After the first round of interviews the researcher then used this information to develop further questions, while exploring new themes based on their experiences up to the time of the subsequent interview. Analysis of data began immediately after each round of interviews and further interrogation and comparisons were made at each stage that followed. This illustrates the dynamic pattern described by Schmuck (1997) regarding the complex interplay between data collection, reflection and action.

Data analysis followed the transcription of interviews and used the methods of coding and memoing as developed by grounded theorists such as Glaser (1992) and Strauss (1987). Three levels of coding were employed, largely in sequence; descriptive coding, topic coding and analytic coding. This reflected the process of developing an 'analytic hierarchy' or 'conceptual scaffolding' (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) to move the analysis from a level of description to the higher levels of explanation and to the development of theory (O'Donoghue, 2007). Following this rigorous and ongoing data analysis, employing the methods of constant comparison and constant interrogation (O'Donoghue, 2007), the findings that have emerged are presented in this paper. They fall into four main themes: (i) personal growth and development; (ii) cultural experiences; (iii) development of teacher identity; and (iv) implications for University programs. These have emerged from the data with strong interdependent links but are presented independently below.

Findings and discussion

Reported below are the principal findings that have emerged from the data analysis thus far. They are largely reported in terms of the analysis and the interpretations that have been developed. Quotations that are in the text are directly from the interviews gained during the data collection. Four themes emerged from the analysis, which form the sub-headings that follow. The fourth theme, implications for the University program, brings the paper to its conclusion.

Personal growth and development

Personal development was the first major theme that emerged from the initial interviews and continued to feature through the second and third interviews. Students felt that participation in a program outside of Canada gave them a better opportunity to develop a foundation understanding of themselves. They spoke of having family and friendship networks well established at home but they saw the challenge of stepping outside these networks as a move towards a certain level of maturity and self belief.

The first set of interviews indicated that students were concerned with their own personal growth, and developing their own specific identity, although they also saw this personal development as a way to develop a platform for their career. Students saw the year in Australia as an opportunity to experience life without the direct input of close family and friends. Participants identified themselves as “uptight” in comparison to Australian friends that they had made. Participants recognized the impact of the Australian context and the subtle differences between Australia and Canada, and saw the experience of these differences as a great chance to explore their own identity and develop a more mature view of the world.

One student saw the program as “learning about themselves and taking this anywhere in the world”. This global perspective was a common element amongst participants as was their intent to develop a clearer understanding of themselves. They also spoke about improving their capacity to face pressures, such as those of university life in a location remote from their normal support systems. The pressures that they recognised included relocation, immersion in another societal culture (as distinct from the academic culture), different assessment processes, and coming to terms with new (school) educational settings with which they were completely unfamiliar.

One student characterised this experience as “a turning point of my life”. This was echoed by other participants and was related to comments about the opportunity for students to be “acting

independently from my parents”. The comments that participants made in this regard led to initial thoughts of students going through a process that might be termed a ‘rite of passage’.

This idea of a ‘rite of passage’ was expressed in terms of aspects of the program the students were undertaking individually and the “sub-cultural” elements the students created as a collective while taking this journey. Students talked of travelling to particular locations in and outside of Australia; they conveyed the importance of becoming employed in part-time work as a strategy to deal with Australian cultural effectiveness or the need to live with an Australian flatmate to counter the initial culture shock.

The final aspect of personal development that emerged from the data was that students related their ability to deal with changes and new circumstances as important to their development as a teacher. This aspect will be further developed in the section on teacher identity.

Cultural Experiences

The second major theme that emerged from the data is best described as ‘cultural experiences. Issues that the participants raised in this theme included: adapting to living within an Australian community; the participants’ own beliefs and definitions of ‘culture’; the participants’ sense of assimilating with the culture of an Australian university; and how participants saw their interaction with Australian culture as part of their development as a global citizen. The emergence of a topic of cultural difference seems surprising considering that the cultural differences between Canadian students and their Australian counterparts might appear quite small; nevertheless, the students interviewed spoke strongly about this and they identified this as crucial area of their transformative process. What follows in this section is an outline of four sub-themes. Their importance lies in the potentially substantial implications for teacher education programs at the case study university, such as addressing policy and practice in recognition of cultural nuances’ of this cohort.

Living within an Australian community. Living within the local community proved problematic for some students. The data revealed students had initial trouble adapting, for instance to matters such as the limited internet access available, the high price of fresh fruit and vegetables and the limitations of the local transport system around the university. These were entirely different from their former experiences.

One key strategy that the students used in the early stages of their time in Australia, to effect a more successful assimilation into the local community, was to seek employment in service based industries. This proved beneficial to the students in many ways as they spoke about gaining a better

understanding of how Australians used the English language and about creating new support networks, outside the university and their own peer-group that they could rely on.

Participants understood that living away from home would have implications for their growth and they prepared themselves and their families for this change in circumstances. Changes they made included new forms of communications with former friends and family via ‘blogs’ and e-mails. Developing new social skills to enhance their new support networks was part of their intention. One student suggested they “were looking for life skills” and saw their friends and family in Canada as “not going anywhere”.

The participants’ beliefs about broad cultural differences and their definition. Participants often noted that their study program was a chance to experience another culture while at the same time expressing the need to “fit in”. One student described Australian culture as “more easy-going” while another student referred to Australian culture as laid-back and identified Canadians like themselves as rather “up-tight”. Statements about this difference became more substantial as the interviews unfolded. After commenting on the differences between people of their own status, one of the initial differences about broader culture they spoke about was the recognition of indigenous peoples. Participants also commented favourably on the substantial recognition of cultural diversity and sensitivity within the program and among academic staff. Their perceptions of culture developed further when they started to recognize that cultural differences existed between the university structures and processes and what they had been used to previously, and that these would have a substantial impact on their progress through the program.

The beliefs and definitions of culture expressed by participants was very limited and based on two recurring themes. These were the relationship between indigenous people and other Australians in the community, and the way that Australians used “slang”, as they referred to local idiom. While these definitions reflect what might seem very narrow differences in culture, they nevertheless had some real significance. In particular, mastery of idiom was important, as students believe this would be an essential feature of their successful induction into the program and as a significant variable in determining the success of their upcoming practicum experiences.

Participants believed that dealing with cultural change would translate into better preparedness for the teaching role. Most students commented that being able to cope with cultural difference was an advantage when applying for a teaching position, regardless of location in the world. One participant wanted to be able to teach young people in Australia and overseas. Nearly all believed that they were being prepared for teaching in Queensland while also being prepared for teaching in

other countries. Some participants felt that this cultural learning was beneficial to their life skills and improved their readiness for teaching in any context.

Assimilating with Australian university cultures. Academic differences between Australian and Canadian universities were not nominated by the researcher as a key factor in the first or second interviews yet these emerged strongly in the data. Participants particularly highlighted differences with regard to workload, assessment practices, and the teaching styles of lecturers.

Comparisons between Irwin University and Canadian universities were gathered from peers to make judgments about the culture of this program. Initial comparisons centred on the size of Irwin University and the workload expected. Students compared their workload at Irwin University with their previous workload in an undergraduate degree in Canada. Some students recognised the substantial differences between aspects of their previous study (science, business or arts programs in Canada) and the type of study involved in this Education program. They spoke about differences between expectations and workload between Australia and Canada. One participant suggested that Canadians seem to have more contact time during their undergraduate studies. They did not expect to be overwhelmed by the workload. The fact that there were two blocks of work placement in Australia compared to four blocks in the Canadian model was raised as important to managing workload by some of the students.

With regard to workload, students particularly focussed on assessments. They said that they found a much greater demand on assessment in Australia than in Canada, in terms of time required and task demands. Some felt that the handing-up of assessment was badly managed as nearly all assessment tasks had to be submitted on Fridays. Some students also noted distinctive differences between assessment expectations of lecturers and those of their tutors who actually administered the assessments. As a result they found themselves continually seeking clear and precise information and reassurance about coursework and assessment expectations.

Lecture structures were mentioned by the majority of students and their expectations were that there would be little difference between Canadian universities and their Australian university. Yet, by the second interview the differences in lecture structure and dynamics had become clearer to the students and the data showed that they were having a negative impact on their stress levels and attendance patterns. Participants also noted the integration of undergraduate students within a graduate course as a major departure from their previous experiences, even though this was the first time they had participated in a graduate level program. One participant expected a “higher workload

than the undergraduates” and that they were “shocked” that graduates were mixed with undergraduates.

Students also said that they were surprised by the teaching styles of their lecturers. The increased familiarity between academic staff and students in Australia required participants to work in different ways to what they had experienced previously. The students commented that the lecturers “had fun” and were more engaging during lectures and tutorials. This was in the light of negative generalizations made about Canadian lecturers. One participant commented that Canadian lecturers read from the text and that their undergraduate degree was very “boring”. Another categorised Canadian universities as “more regimented” and not as “laid back”. Teaching staff identified as being efficient and organized with clear and stable structures were labelled as “good”.

As a result participants spoke about developing new strategies to use in the unfamiliar situations they faced in Irwin University, and these coping strategies became a distinctive feature of their experiences in the class-based aspects of their programs. The findings from the study suggest that the differences in cultural discourses between Australian universities and students coming into the university culture from another educational background are often overlooked, and it is a premise of this paper that this must be addressed.

Teacher Identity

The issue of teacher identity increasingly surfaced as the interviews progressed. The term teacher identity was never actually used by participants but it emerged as a higher order theme from the analysis of data. Students spoke of their intention to become teachers as passionately as their intention to develop a personal platform from which they could launch a career. Travelling to Australia was a way of looking for life skills and gaining an advantage in the race for a job as a teacher in the education system in Canada. Students aligned life skills closely to the skills required of teachers.

Participants said that they were seeking new experiences and often a new identity. This aligns with the concept of a ‘global perspective’ defined by the National Science Teachers Association as “cross cultural understanding, open-mindedness, anticipation of complexity, (and) resistance to stereotyping” as well as the “appreciation of other people’s points of view” (NSTA, 2006, p. 5). Data suggested that the participants not only sought to explore their personal abilities and their understanding of cultures and communities, but they also wanted to explore a new learning environment.

The relationship between teacher identity and personal identity is a complex issue that arose from the data of this study. Data showed participants related the development of their own identity as an *individual* very closely to that of their identity as a *teacher*. The ability to cope with stresses and complexities of life were seen as key elements in the role of the teacher in any location. Skills such as setting up friendships, establishing routines, dealing with financial constraints and managing multiple workloads were seen as important aspects that can be taken from their personal life into their teaching identity.

Another component of teacher identity was the level of self-belief participants had in their ability to achieve the goals they had set for themselves. The participants talked about their ability to manage multiple tasks with limited resources. They saw themselves as independent from their support networks in Canada and that this substantially impacted on their ability to deal with complex situations.

Many participants referred to the development of their own identity during this particular stage of their life. While some participants felt substantially older than other students within the program this does suggest that they all felt more mature than their Australian counterparts, and felt they were performing at a higher level. One participant saw the program as learning about oneself and taking these learning's anywhere in the world.

The level of planning required to make this learning process in self-awareness a reality was often referred to in interviews. This planning, often spanning a period of eighteen months, is in itself an indicator of real understanding of the students' development of their own identity, both professional and personal. It indicates genuine commitment to the concept of exploring not only the career of teacher education but also in terms of their own identity and ability to cope with complex situations. Some of the students saw the planning stages as part of the journey, a journey that involved relating personal strengths to teaching strengths.

Conclusion: Implications for the University Program

This paper has presented the preliminary data gathered through a series of three interviews over two semesters with Canadian students who had enrolled in a Graduate Diploma in Education program in a regional Australian university. The paper has outlined the cultural perspectives of the Canadian students as they sought to develop aspects of their teacher identity as well as engage in a process of

personal growth. These are synthesised into the ‘global perspective’ that emerges from the experiences of these pre-service teachers, something they treasure as a significant ‘marque’ of their identity.

This preliminary investigation has raised implications for regional universities and their graduate education programs. Data gathered from this study revealed students’ concerns about lecture and tutorial structures and assessment regimes, all of which may require purposeful structuring rather than being left to chance. While changes in some of these areas may be considered to ensure that the needs, expectations and cultural anxieties of international students are addressed, in large part University policy can address the issues through the pastoral care of these students, who may often be forgotten. This may be because the very cultural differences identified by the students are ignored by policy-makers and practitioners who believe that the differences between Canadians and Australians are too small to matter. Careful orientation procedures to meet the concerns of these students and to prepare them for differences in workload, teaching and learning structures and assessment regimes, and the ‘quirks’ of Australian teachers need to be considered carefully.

The innate need for personal development within a global context as stated by these Canadian students, and driven by their thirst for cultural awareness and understanding, is in turn helping each of them to form both a personal and professional identity. It is this process that universities must be aware of, and recognise and in so doing be prepared to help these students to realise their goals.

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